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Precarious Work? Migrants' Narratives of Coping with Working Conditions in the Danish Labour Market

Doris Pljevaljcic Simkunas*, Trine Lund Thomsen*

This article deals with migrants' experiences of precarious working conditions in the cleaning and construction industries in the Danish labour market as seen from their perspective. The experiences are retained through biographical narrative interviews with migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe and are used to gain an understanding of the concrete strategies they apply when coping with their short-term contracts, demanding working hours, risk of unemployment and other insecurities. Migrants' experiences of precarity and insecurity in their work is confirmed, to some degree, in numerous research studies. However, the resistance and strategies expressed by the migrant workers in their narratives show that they have also developed specific ways to cope with this precarity. The article contributes to a new understanding of migrants' responses to precarity in which they engage their social and cultural resources to cope with the labour market conditions they face in Denmark.

Keywords: biographical narratives; cultural and social capital; labour security; migrant workers; precarious working conditions

Introduction

Since the enlargement of the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013, the number of labour migrants has steadily increased and the group of CEE migrants now constitutes an integral part of the Danish labour market (Andersen and Felbo-Kolding 2013). The largest group of migrant workers in Denmark comes from Poland, Romania and Lithuania (STAR 2018), a central characteristic of whom is that they are, on average, younger and have higher levels of education than native workers in the Danish labour market (Rasmussen 2015). Some of the first studies on CEE labour migration showed that Poles who performed cleaning work were highly overqualified when compared to other cleaners (Arnholtz and Hansen 2013). This developmental trend seems to have continued. Recent registrations have shown that migrants are overqualified for their work and, in effect, re-migrate

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after several years of work, no longer to return to Denmark (DST 2018). Although the Danish labour market is generally more regulated and possibly less ‘precarious’ when compared to other European countries (Refslund 2016), precarity can still be found in specific groups more than in others in the Danish labour market, particularly in migrants’ employment (Rasmussen, Refslund, Sørensen and Larsen 2016).

When looking at the different industries in Denmark, statistics show that the cleaning and construction industries employ significant numbers of CEE workers compared to other industries (STAR 2018). Additionally, the figures show that there is a segmentation of workers within semi-skilled and unskilled jobs like cleaning, where many migrants – and a significant proportion of female CEE migrants – are employed (DST 2017). The segmentation of migrants into specific industries in the labour market prevents their full inclusion in the society and socialisation with national workers (Caro, Berntsen, Lillie and Wagner 2015). It also contributes to the deskilling, in particular, of highly educated migrants. Simultaneously, migrants can also be exposed to different uncertainties in their work. For instance, part-time employment in the cleaning industry can result in no job-seekers’ allowance or no unemployment benefits for the cleaners, who have to have full-time jobs in order to be covered by the unemployment benefits system. Construction work is, on the other hand, mostly based on time-limited and seasonal contracts. The uncertainty related to switching between time-limited deals in the construction industry can sometimes result in irregular or non-existent contracts and impact on the worker’s rights and access to social benefits. For example, posted workers from CEE countries have been observed to have very flexible and long working days and lower wages when compared to native workers (Arnholz and Hansen 2013). These different factors regarding their working conditions increase the workers’ insecurity and opportunities for stable employment.

A closer look at the diversity within the group of workers from CEE countries reveals both similarities and differences in their work experiences in the construction and cleaning sectors. The migrants’ narratives refer to the more formal aspects of work precarity that hinder the attainment of capital. These aspects can be operationalised as low earnings, a lack of prospects in work (job security or opportunities for advancement), a lack of quality working time (control over hours of work), a lack of intrinsic job quality (skill use, pleasant social environment), many physical and environmental risks and an overly fast pace of work (Broughton, Green, Rickard, Swift, Eichhorst, Tobsch and Tros 2016). In order to ensure greater nuance when considering the individualised experiences of precarity, this article looks at the management of precarity and its connection to individuals’ social and cultural resources or capital. Capital can, from a Bourdieusian perspective, be considered to facilitate higher salaries, reduce intra-ethnic rivalry and provide more knowledge about workers’ rights (especially working hours). Intra-ethnic rivalry is understood as migrants’ differing views on how to protect their ability to gain political, cultural, social and economic properties (Caspersen 2008), which sometimes results in conflicts between co-ethnics. This study also highlights how unequal pay can create power struggles and insecurity within the cleaning and construction sectors.

Despite the many issues that can occur, migrants see themselves as somewhat well-adapting individuals who are capable of managing several of the above-mentioned precarities. CEE migrants’ experiences of precarity in their work are explored through their understanding of their work-life strategies and their ways of coping within the two specific sectors – cleaning and construction. The article seeks to answer the following research question: *How do CEE migrants experience, and cope with, their working conditions in the Danish labour market and the cleaning and construction sectors?* The purpose of this article is to provide a nuanced scope of CEE migrants’ working conditions by giving them a ‘voice in the debate’. By letting the migrants tell their own stories and recount their work-life experiences, it becomes possible to obtain unique information about their work and how it affects their decision-making and coping strategies.

Framing the issues – precarious work and precarious lives

‘Precarious work’ has emerged as a term and concept in the wake of globalisation and the neoliberal development of Western societies. ‘A precarious era’ reflects the global change in the economy and the insecure working conditions of people who mainly have temporary contracts, less employment security and unstable incomes (Rodgers 1989; Standing 2011). In the post-industrial phase, and particularly in the 1970s, precarious work was used to describe what happened as a result of the phasing out of permanent employment or standardised contracts (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). These developments were both experienced by workers and statistically measured regarding the temporality of work and a demand for higher flexibility in working hours (Doogan 2009, 2015). Kalleberg (2011) described developmental trends in Europe and America and observed that certain groups were more vulnerable to precarious work situations than others – for example, the low-skilled, low-paid temporary workers in the secondary labour market. Researchers have in many cases investigated the prevalence of precarious living conditions in specific vulnerable groups who are exposed to uncertainty in housing, health and (an undocumented) status or citizenship. Migrant groups are observed to lack control over these dimensions and events in life (Massey, Durand and Pren 2016; Shier, Graham, Fukuda and Turner 2016). The ‘precarious lives’ of migrants are therefore made up of uncertainties in living and working conditions (Vallas 2015) and of social inequality (Alberti, Holgate and Tapia 2013; Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer 2006; Ciupijus 2011; Lewis, Dwyer, Hodgkinson and Waite 2015).

Precarity is also believed to create fewer rights for equal wage levels in specific groups, and for individuals of a certain age, gender, ethnicity and class, who are more disadvantaged in specific working contexts (Lewis *et al.* 2015; McDowell 2015; McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2009; Waite 2009) – for example, those experiencing social inequality based on some of the intersecting social categories (Crenshaw 1989). More vulnerable groups in society are at risk of doing precarious work. Precarity takes different forms and, in some countries, female workers, older workers, trainees, working students and others are observed to be in a more precarious situation than migrant workers (McKay, Jefferys, Paraksevopoulou and Keles 2012). However, multiple and intersecting categories and statuses of workers can create fewer opportunities for stable employment, and not necessarily in a clear-cut way.

‘Precarious work’ has, in some ways, become associated with workers from CEE countries because they are believed to be more ‘willing to work for lower wages’, to perform ‘dirty’, dangerous and demeaning (3D) jobs and otherwise be exposed to precarious working conditions. Labour migration from CEE has been a central topic across Europe (Burrell 2009; Black, Engbersen, Okólski and Pantír 2010; Hviid and Flyvholm 2010) but more research is needed in order to unravel the migrants’ capability to change their working lives and conditions in a Danish context.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach is based on biographical narrative interviews that focus on how people create their life stories. A crucial aspect of this method is to look at how individuals’ life stories are influenced by the societal context of which they are a part – such as situations, relationships and events. Past situations are applied to cope with the present as well as to plan for the future (Hoerning 2006). In biographical narratives, it is possible to analyse ‘life histories’ as past experiences that seem relevant to current life situations (life chances) and by looking at how these events affect the future intentions (life planning) and current actions of the individual. Methodologically, migrants are assumed to be able to take control of their lives, in light of the changes they face in a new society.

The empirical approach was based on ethnographic principles of engagement, participation, empathy and observation (Bryman 2016). This starting point has been crucial for collecting informants in the field. During the research process, participant observations were carried out in clubs and organisations, Facebook groups, church assemblies, voluntary associations, workplaces, the trade union and other events in urban life for migrants and newcomers. The sampling created acquaintances of a more personal nature and, on a couple of occasions, the researcher gained an ‘insider role’ through her Polish background. As such, all the interviews with Polish migrant workers were conducted in their mother tongue. Other interviews were either conducted in English or with the use of an interpreter, who helped out with two of the interviews with Romanian workers. Each interview lasted between 1 and 3.5 hours, with those conducted in Polish having the best narrative and communicative flow. Although linguistic and cultural understanding facilitated communication during the interviews, access to the field through ethnographic methodology was crucial for good dialogue and the quality of the data. A couple of interviews were also conducted in focus groups of two to five people, where they discussed their general experiences of work, migration, Danish society and the labour market, their family and other social relations. These interviews led to the emergence of several short stories and one or two individual biographical aspects; however, in return, additional topics were discussed on a group level, including the issue of work precarity.

The selection of informants for the study of migrants’ work experiences in the cleaning and construction sectors in Denmark reflects gender segregation in the two separate types of occupation, the former being mostly undertaken by females and the latter only by males. The cleaning industry has, however, become more diverse in terms of gender (Lichtenberg and Juul 2016). The choice of incorporating the two sectors was not intended as a comparative case study but, rather, as a strategy for accessing both male and female migrant workers for the interviews. However, the differences and similarities in the working conditions can still be analysed as industry-specific. The focus in this study is on the individual migrants’ work-life experiences and coping strategies, which entails a significant proportion of intersections between many factors. An intersectional approach to the analysis is pursued in order to capture the complexity of social categories (characteristics) and differences in the studied field. Table 1 sets out the characteristics of the various interviewees.

Table 1. Outline of the interviewed individuals characteristics

N=41	Gender	Age	Nationality	Marital status and children	Education	Residence (regions)
Construction N=21	Male: 21	21–30: 5	Romanian: 6	Unmarried: 11	Vocational education and training: 15	North Jutland: 8
	Female: 0	31–40: 10	Polish: 14	Married: 10	Short further education (1–3 years): 1	Funen: 13
		41–50: 5	Czech: 1	Married/unmarried with children: 11	Medium cycle further education (3½–5 years): 2	
		51–60: 1			Long further education (minimum 5 years): 3	
Cleaning N=20	Male: 5	21–30: 14	Romanian: 3	Unmarried: 11	High school education: 1	North Jutland: 13
	Female: 15	31–40: 5	Polish: 10	Married: 9	Short further education (1–3 years): 2	Central Jutland: 1
		41–50: 1	Lithuanian: 2	Married/unmarried with children: 9	Medium cycle further education (3½–5 years): 11	South Jutland: 1
		51–60: 0	Latvian: 1 Hungarian: 2 Slovakian: 2		Long further education (minimum 5 years): 6	Funen: 5

The majority of those undertaking cleaning work had relatively high educational backgrounds and qualifications obtained in their countries of origin. Approximately half of the interviewed cleaners were either studying at a university or a university college, while the other half had the sole status of migrant workers. Nevertheless, these workers also expressed a strong desire to educate themselves, mainly through vocational and Danish language courses. Regarding the construction workers in the sample, the majority had vocational and technical training. In addition, they could be characterised by a lesser degree of association with the country of destination, Denmark, because most were employed on seasonal contracts of 3–4 weeks' duration, with 1 week in their home countries. The country of destination was their primary place of residence, however, and commuting had become a way of life for many of them.

In order to conduct a more in-depth analysis, it will be based on 10 of the 41 interviews. These 10 are chosen because they are exemplary and represent the variety of themes and issues also presented in the other interviews. They therefore also represent specific patterns found in the whole sample. The study is also based on an abductive approach, which takes the point of departure in the empirical data without having any particular theory in mind but, at the same time, acknowledges that theory is needed to explain the findings (Peirce 1979).

Precarious work and coping strategies – a theoretical framework

The conceptual framework used in the analysis of the biographical narrative interviews in this study includes Guy Standing's (1999, 2011, 2014) conceptualisation of precarious working conditions. This approach was chosen because Standing's interpretation of precarious work matches the narratives of the CEE migrants and their work-life experiences. Following the migrant experience of working in Denmark, the study focuses on how they cope with the conditions under which they work. In this regard, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986a, b, 1994) conceptualisation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1986b, 1994) – economic, cultural and social – is also essential for the action taking place and the space of action that is available to the CEE migrant workers in the labour market.

Generally, migrants do not have precarious employment unless multiple aspects of precarity are prevalent and correlate with jobs in lower positions, where there are few opportunities to enter high-status occupations or middle-status craft occupations (Standing 2011). Status loss and frustration are therefore also more apparent in precarious employment where migrants can suffer from a lack of recognition of their higher formal educational skills and may settle for lower-level jobs. A worker also lacks control in precarious work, missing out on career and skill-development opportunities, and lacking control over their working hours, work intensity, production and the equipment they can use (Standing 1999, 2011, 2014). Furthermore, precarious work situations might prevent the formation of solidarity in the labour community; e.g. the sense of cohesion and community spirit in work, especially for migrants with temporary contracts and unstable employment. Instead, it is likely to be the opposite: it might induce a sense of alienation, competitiveness and instrumentality in work. Since the 'precariat' lacks some control in work, he or she is not necessarily constrained in all aspects and might be able to cooperate and negotiate wage hours, work pace or other aspects of employment. However, the combination of several aspects and the individual's characteristics and biography can create a sensitivity towards precarity. Meanwhile, all securities are significant and apparent in precarious work, though individuals might not value them all equally (Standing 2011). Precarious conditions can, however, exist when particular types of security are missing and when they have a considerable impact on the migrant's well-being and stability in life. Standing (2011) outlines seven types of labour security which clarify those circumstances in one's working life which can be missing. These are:

1. *Labour market security* – the possibility of obtaining an adequate income; at a macro level, this is summarised by government commitment to employees’ ‘full employment’;
2. *Employment security* – the protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing and the imposition of fines on employers who fail to adhere to rules, etc.;
3. *Job security* – the ability to and possibilities of maintaining a niche in employment, plus barriers to skill dilutions, and opportunities for upward mobility in terms of status and income;
4. *Work security* – protection against accidents and illness at work, restrictive health and safety regulations, limits on working time, night work and the lack of compensation for mishaps (accidents);
5. *Skill reproduction security* – the opportunity to gain skills through apprenticeships, employment training and make use of one’s competencies;
6. *Income security* – the assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security and progressive taxation to reduce inequality and supplement low incomes; and
7. *Representation security* – having a collective voice in the labour market through, for example, independent trade unions and the right to strike (Standing 2011).

The seven types of labour security are expressed to varying degrees in the narratives of the migrant workers. However, in the analysis, it is particularly *employment*, *job*, *income* and *representation security* which are the most often expressed and which have a stronger effect on the workers’ lives and how they cope with precarious working conditions.

How an employee deals with precarious working conditions depends on both the resources and the capital that s/he possesses and the social structure that is present. Capital is either the materialised or embodied form of resources that enable the individual to acquire a position in the social space (e.g. space of work). Pierre Bourdieu (1986a) described three distinct forms of capital that represent the immanent structures of the social world. Depending on the context, capital presents itself in three basic forms: *economic capital* – a material capital that can be converted to money and liquidity; *social capital*, which is intangible and made up of social responsibilities, connections or networks – although it can be converted into economic capital, and may be institutionalised in the form of social positions and statuses; and *cultural capital* – also an immaterial possession which can also be converted into economic capital and institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications. Finally, Bourdieu (1986b) talked about symbolic capital, formed by the recognition and legitimisation of economic, social and cultural capital. He argued that cultural capital could be acquired to different degrees, depending on the specific society and social class to which a person belongs. In relation to the conversion of capital, cultural capital transnationally is more opaque and makes the convertibility of capital in this way difficult because of its uneven distribution in different national contexts (Bourdieu 1994). One could say that some forms of capital ‘travel’ better than others due to different national contexts. This would be an indication of a system’s reproductive character. A language skill, which has convertible value as a form of cultural capital, gives access to other resources but can take time to acquire (‘or travel’) in a new context.

Gender and ethnicity are also important markers of social positions that enable or restrict access to cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital. These forms of capital represent various resources that are mutually convertible, with the possibility of being transformed into symbolic capital or higher social positions (Bourdieu 1986a, b). A lack of symbolic or negative symbolic capital can lead to vulnerability in terms of symbolic violence; *inter alia*, this can be expressed through racialised, gendered and precarious labour conditions. When the conversion of capital is blocked, inequality and precarity are produced or maintained.

Experiences of precarious working conditions

In the analysis of the CEE migrant workers' narratives, stories of precarity emerged in the form of low wages, high flexibility requirements and many hours of overtime, as well as competition, power struggles and a high turnover of workers. The narratives offer crucial experiences of precarious work and power struggles and represent the lack of security that is so characteristic of precarious conditions – or, rather, the lack of Standing's (2011) seven types of security previously discussed. Management strategies and actions towards precarity can be converted and institutionalised in innovative solutions, re-organisation in trade unions and a general focus on workers' struggles for better working conditions (Munck, Schierup and Delgado Wise 2011). The struggle for better work and accumulation of new educational and cultural skills are used to overcome insecurity and shaped by migrants' previous experiences of precarious work in their country of origin (Cazes, Nesporova and Office 2003; Castles 2015).

Construction and service work, including cleaning, has become increasingly deregulated and individualised in Europe in recent years, and this development will have greater significance because of the increasing number of job openings filled by migrants (Pajnik 2016; Pajnik and Anthias 2014). Migrant workers' wage levels have increased in line with this deregulation and with EU enlargement. The migrants' narratives in the study indicate that, in some jobs, wages are individually distributed and depend on how their employers and other workers feel that the individual migrant's capital, particularly social capital, has accumulated. Their narratives allude to an uneven distribution of wages created by the social context, where the individual's resources, abilities and social characteristics play a crucial role in their gaining higher economic capital. A search for this latter is, in some instances, seen to result in conflict between Polish workers in the construction industry. Dariusz (41 years old), a plumber who works in construction, expresses his feelings regarding the income insecurity:

We have different pay levels in the construction company. If someone receives higher wages, people get jealous and someone always gets snitched on in front of the employer. The person who does something wrong would receive a scolding from the employer and no one would help him, and particularly not the one who snitched on him; he would feel better and be free from scolding. That is the big problem of Poles on construction sites and in other types of work.

As his interview extract reveals, Dariusz feels that the level of social capital is significant to his income security; he shows the interrelationship between Polish construction workers in precarious work conditions as they compete for better social positions, higher social capital and better pay. Although Dariusz's employment is regulated by Danish labour standards and employers' association, his salary is lower than 'the standard' in the construction industry and only 60 kroner (8 euros) per hour. His work is not illegal and he is hired by a Danish employer, but his lower salary affects Dariusz's situation and social status at work. Dariusz's other narratives, in which he expresses his fears of job loss, alienation and 'intra-group' conflicts allude to precarity in the social-work environment. In his narratives, the employer plays an executive role and is seen to promote certain migrants, who thus outrank others with lower social capital. Being employed as a posted worker, Dariusz is sent to work in all the Scandinavian countries, and due to the travelling between work in Denmark and Poland, Dariusz has a similar work-life balance to other construction workers, who have adopted this working life strategy for several years. Dariusz articulates the issues of how labour mobility encourages migrants to play the breadwinner role in the family and provide them with a seemingly stable family structure. This role and the economic situation together put pressure on the workers in terms of commitment and 'submission' to their work. The lack of income security in the construction industry and the competition for wages can also be explained by the marginalisation of Dariusz and other CEE workers based on their class and migrant status (Pajnik 2016). Here Dariusz recounts why some of the issues could be related to this:

I do not earn as much as a Danish worker but I still do the work because, after all, it is better than other work [in Poland]. We (or I) who work for less money are dependent on what the boss says and does, and on what is written on paper – for example, that this is the minimum wage and that's what we earn on paper – although it is not the truth.

The difference between the wage levels of Danish and CEE workers is here marked by less conflict than between Dariusz's co-ethnic relationships, but still as an unequal experience of work, because of the anticipated higher cultural capital of national workers. In general, statistics showed that male workers from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania, along with migrants from non-Western countries, who are between 20 and 59 years old, had a relatively low annual income of less than 225 000 Danish kroner or 30 178 euros (before tax) in 2016. Furthermore, the Danish authorities have suggested that work in the construction industry has become more competitive since EU enlargement due to 'unequal wages' and the presence of more posted workers in the construction industry; work precarity has thus become an issue (Arnholtz and Andersen 2016; Caro *et al.* 2015). Conversely, male workers from Poland placed themselves in the middle of the income distribution, with average earnings of 290 000 Danish kroner (38 896 euros). Although some of the Polish male workers experience income insecurity, the statistics above indicate that they are not the most economically disadvantaged group of workers. Furthermore, CEE women (Polish, Romanian, Lithuanian, etc.) are known to earn less than their male counterparts, with an average of approximately 210 000 Danish kroner or 28 166 euros (DST 2017), which means that the women, and particularly female cleaners, are less privileged economically. Ania, a 27-year-old Polish woman who lives with her family (husband and child) in Denmark, pointed out that her salary in a private cleaning company was meagre:

The salary was, when compared with the work in horticulture, lower than 100 kroner (13 euros) per hour. But I was dependent on it, and had to make money because the season in horticulture was over and there was no longer any need for help, so I had to continue working in cleaning.

Ania reveals that she had to continue the work due to her family situation in Denmark and her mother in Poland, whom she wanted to help financially. In her narratives, she also states that the financial insecurity was exacerbated by issues of employment insecurity and poor working conditions such as the lack of instruction and the exploitation of workers:

If I was promised a day off, I never got it. If I planned on having just one weekend off, in the morning, I would receive a call that I had to meet up for work anyway. I never got the whole day off. It was quite awful conditions.

In Standing's terminology, Ania's experiences here would imply that great deals of uncertainty in income and work security are taking place. Some of these issues were also followed up by the other cleaners in the sample, who were tied by the odd working hours and felt pressured by their employer to go to work. In an interview with a young Polish couple in their early 30s, it became apparent that income insecurity is sometimes followed by job insecurity and largely affects CEE workers in the cleaning industry. The male worker, Karol, is 32 and has had employment in the cleaning, manufacturing and construction industries. His quote below demonstrates that economic uncertainty in the cleaning industry has a significant impact on a household and a family's living conditions if the workers get fired from their jobs in Denmark or do not receive their salaries:

If the worker has a loan in Poland – let's say he owes 1 million Danish kroner – and he suddenly becomes unemployed in Denmark, he and his family do not have anything to live on. So that's why they, as people generally say, 'lick the arse' of their employer, in order not to get fired from the job. And someone always gossips about the other to the boss (...). The migrant workers live at the expense of the lives of other migrant workers. Well, you know what I mean, right? They sell themselves and become slaves to their bosses at work.

Although Karol and Daria talked about other migrants' general experiences of precarity, not only caused by work itself but by the families' general dependency on a stable income, they suggested that their living situation meant that they were more predisposed to precarious work in terms of job insecurity based on 'slave-like working conditions' and 'lower-class work'. The notion of class has become indirectly important for Daria and Karol because they are both highly educated and have tried, in different ways, to deal with labour precarity through knowledge, trade union membership, further education and the use of close Danish friends who have helped them in their precarious working situations. In the study, many workers had already secured themselves financially through unemployment benefits or trade unions. However, the road to either getting benefits or becoming a member of a trade union is not necessarily with the 'endorsement' of the employer, as 31-year-old Katarzyna from Poland, who had worked in hotel cleaning for nearly five years, explained:

In the beginning, when we had to sign contracts, we had conversations with our employer. When my employer asked me if I was a union member, I answered 'Yes', because I confused it with my unemployment benefits. He made big eyes, sighed and said: 'Which one?'. So I got the impression that he would be unhappy with me being a unionist. Then I said: 'Stop, stop, I meant a member of an unemployment fund' and he did like this [exhales deeply]...

She speaks here about when she received her employment contract and about her employer's reactions to the issue of her representational security. The policy of flexicurity – which is a combination of flexibility and security in the Danish labour market model – allows the employer to hire and fire employees due to high numerical flexibility and cyclical fluctuations in the economy. However, employees are permitted to protect themselves against these conditions through the use of unemployment insurance and with the help of trade unions, especially if the worker is fired unjustly or illegally. Like Katarzyna, Daria also mentions the importance of acquiring membership of a trade union and how it influenced her relationship with her employer, who eventually fired her because she had requested better work conditions. Daria talks, below, about the lack of employment security in cleaning jobs for both of them and about how Karol was fired from the cleaning company where they both worked:

When we came back from Poland, Karol was dismissed without us knowing why. Yes, and then [there] began to be problems for both of us. (...) Because I had too much contact with the union I was no longer a pleasant employee, so she had to get rid of me somehow. While she could not do away with me legally, she got rid of Karol; that was the most likely the reason for his dismissal.

In the above quote, the couple are recounting an episode in which a trade union was involved, and which was personally directed against Karol. The latter subsequently received threats and allegations of bad workmanship, even though this could not be proved by the management of the private cleaning company. Daria and Karol also believe, like some of the other interviewed workers in the sample, that Polish workers who are more prone to 'run for the money', engage in too much overtime, put up with poor treatment and live in fear of being

sacked. They are therefore more vulnerable in precarious work situations. Karolina, a female Polish cleaner aged 42, shares similar views about what precarious work conditions mean for CEE migrant workers. Below, she talks about her husband's work as a welder in a private company. The precarity of the situation creates a feeling of anxiety for the workers, who fear being sacked if they do not work overtime. Karolina said that Danish workers are in less precarious situation than the Poles:

The Danish workers make weekend plans and work does not get in the way, unless they really want to go to work on a Saturday. But Poles... I think they are more afraid of losing their job. (...) So when my husband heard that there was no more overtime and about long meetings at the office and that they needed to fire 20 people, he became really nervous and immediately worried that he may be fired again.

Overtime and weekend work are an individual choice, but some migrant workers may feel the company's survival to be 'their responsibility' and feel pressured to take on more overtime and weekend work in order to avoid being replaced, subcontracted or dismissed (Bernstein 1986). In the above case, Karolina also refers to younger trainees, new employees, Polish workers and other CEE migrants who work in the company. The social categories of the workers' employment statuses, age, ethnicity and gender expose the individuals to precarity (Standing 2011); this applies particularly, for example, to younger and more inexperienced CEE workers who have temporary employment contracts. Fixed-term contracts may, therefore, provide more security for migrants and be of decisive importance for workers who seek permanent residence in Denmark.

This part of the analysis, in particular, addresses the importance of the social and economic aspects of precarity that apply to both industries, due to the low wages, high job turnover, replacements, part-time nature of the work, need for availability (flexibility) and many overtime hours involved in both sectors. The analysis shows that precarious working conditions include power struggles and unequal wage levels. Intra-group conflicts are particularly pronounced in places where migrant workers experience a greater degree of rivalry between co-ethnics, and in segmented work occupations and workplaces in the cleaning industry (Thörnquist 2015). The experiences are rooted in general income and employment insecurity and how it affects CEE workers. There is also considerable variation between migrants who manage to generate the capital necessary to overcome the precarious work conditions of low wages, high job turnover, replacements, part-time nature, need for availability and extensive overtime hours.

This study indicates that job insecurity can be a concern for cleaners who are reliant on the work as their primary source of income. However, their lack of employment and job security and plans to become full-time workers can motivate them to improve their work conditions and gain representational security (support from a trade union). Conversely, construction workers who are employed on seasonal and temporary contracts and who simultaneously feel underpaid in their work, lack employment and income security (Standing 2011). Some of these struggles are aggravated by the separation of a family between two countries, where the workers have to manage a transnational working and family life. The following section addresses how migrants cope with such precarious working conditions.

Coping with precarious working conditions

The ways in which migrant workers deal with the precarious working conditions in cleaning and construction work are influenced by their past experiences, life plans and life chances in Denmark. Here, the relationship between life chances and life planning determines how different life situations are handled (Thomsen 2006). Working life is rarely completely separate from an individual's family and spare time, and individuals mostly try to create a mutual relationship (or attempt to create coherence) between them (Hoerning 2006). In this

context, it is crucial to consider which type of capital the individual worker possesses and to what extent it can be transmitted into a Danish context. If there is a lack of opportunity to convey capital (cultural, social and economic) in the labour market, the precarious working conditions are more likely to be accepted as a fact of working life. For example, 29-year-old Agnieszka, a single woman from Poland who works in the cleaning sector, explained the situation thus:

But then again you can get used to some conditions. It is true. In the house that I lived in before, we were 16 people altogether... Yes, and we only had two kitchens and a bathroom. It was pretty hard-core. But I could adapt to the circumstances... So I think that people can adapt regardless of the situation. Similarly, I believe it is the same for the work conditions. No matter what the work is like, if you really want it, you can do it.

Accepting the conditions you face, as Agnieszka showed above, can be seen as a pragmatic way of dealing with the available opportunities, regardless of the type of work involved. In this way, Agnieszka's particular work conditions also reflect the individual's ability to adapt, deal with precarity and maintain a life plan. Agnieszka further states that: 'Cleaning work does not always allow you to plan your spare time. If something comes up at work, you have to be there to help. There is no one forcing you, but there's this unwritten rule that if there is work, we all have to help each other, right?'. In the narrative extract, she also describes how mutual understanding and social responsibility helps the cleaning staff deal with their insecurity in the work environment. An acceptance of overtime, fast-paced or weekend work and other flexible working hours, including night shifts, may sometimes be the only option to maintain any kind of job, particularly those like Agnieszka's job in cleaning.

Some of the CEE workers have stable social relationships with their co-ethnics and help each other in terms of access to work and of job retention – which is important for both cleaners and construction workers. Bourdieu (1986b) said that social capital, gained through a social network, plays a crucial role and can be both qualifying and limiting in relation to what options are available when sustaining and managing a job. Florin, a 26-year-old male Romanian cleaner, considered how social networks can play a role in dealing with hard and demanding work:

And of course, in the beginning, I had to work a lot, because I did not know if I could keep my job, because it's really hard, because you have to prove that you are really fast at cleaning, and I believe that my sister really had to kick my arse the first time I worked in the hotel. I helped her last summer for a day because she had too many rooms to clean, and then she told me that I also have to be really quick if I am to manage cleaning work.

Florin's narrative shows which resources and criteria are required to handle the fast pace of work in cleaning jobs, especially in hotels. He gained knowledge about the working conditions through his sister, who helped him to attain the resources relevant to this type of work. According to Florin, CEE workers who are unable to keep up the pace in cleaning work are the most at risk of being fired. This issue is significant for how Florin understands his working conditions and deals with the high amount of pressure. To maintain a job and income, social capital is relevant as it enables workers to help each other out in critical situations, especially within the family. Pawel, a 36-year-old Polish male construction worker, has a slightly different approach to work pressure and working hours, and how he makes use of his employment opportunities:

I work 12 hours every day for 18 days but I have 10 or 12 days off, and my boss... How should I say that? My boss takes advantage of the situation that I have the opportunity to work longer, faster but not cheaper. I get 170 kroner (23 euros) per hour as do the Danes. (...) However all of that suits me very well because I can work 18 days and then go back for a week and a half. Because I have more time to spend with my family than I had when I worked in Poland, I am pleased with the arrangement.

Despite the long working hours and his constant availability to his employer, Pawel also states that he uses the working conditions to his advantage, and simultaneously maintains a loyal social relationship with his employer – a relationship which allows him to become an empowered craftsman in his field. This particular aspect can be difficult to achieve in cleaning work, where there is high unemployment and job insecurity, as Daria and Karol referred to earlier. Their coping strategy was based on their gaining useful knowledge about the work conditions and social rights of workers in Denmark. The acquisition of cultural capital happens when some of the workers become aware and recognise that they are subject to unusual or precarious working conditions when compared with Danish workers and want, therefore, to be considered as equal workers. Daria, from Poland, who is 30 and the mother of a small child, stated:

I joined the union and it began to interest me because I knew there was something wrong. I could simply tell, because I could see how the others worked. While we ran around daily in jumpers wet with sweat... because you had to run around to get everything done, right... I had to carry 10 full bags of garbage daily, even though I was pregnant. I had said to my employer that I would come back after my maternity leave, but only if she would change my working hours, because I could not... I did not have anyone whom I could leave my child with, so it could not be earlier than 7 in the morning. (...) I also got a warning about being fired.

Daria's way of handling the increased rate of work, physically demanding conditions with low occupational safety, was to gain knowledge about workers' general rights – for example, to be on maternity leave and to have the right to slow down the rate of work. In fact, motherhood and having children is one of the gendered inequality factors in the labour market (Cevea 2016; Ollus 2016), where migrant women in particular lack collective agreements and are more exposed to a high degree of uncertainty in their employment in cleaning. For construction workers, like Pawel, or for CEE posted workers who commute between work and their country of residence, family is a segregated part of everyday life. This means that some of the construction workers can keep their family and working lives separate, more than permanently resident migrants working in the field of cleaning – and especially women with children. The lack of recognition of their rights as mothers who need to adjust their working hours can be seen as harassment in the workplace by the employer. This is partly because they are no longer considered to be part of a flexible workforce due to their motherhood engagement.

Acquiring language skills is, in many respects, essential for the attainment of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986a) and crucial when dealing with the type of precarity (threats of firing) mentioned above. Cultural capital can be essential for the migrant workers dealing with employment insecurity in cleaning, as Daria explains:

There were many ways to learn Danish. Wherever I was, I read, for example, some rules or something. If I did not know, I had to ask. I asked a Dane at work, for example, 'Look, how does this work here? For example, this rule here?'. Yes, it was like that for me too, so... And the more I knew, the safer I felt in relation to work and society... because I believe that knowledge has the most significant value.

Knowledge and information are essential tools for participating on equal terms in the labour market (Standing 2011). In this context, one finds a pattern in which both cultural capital and the length of stay in the country are of great importance for how labour migrants become aware of other work conditions in the destination country. Cultural capital is an essential factor for the migrant's ability to apply an appropriate strategy in response to the conditions to which he or she is exposed. The level of capital is crucial to whether the individual migrant worker uses either an adaptation strategy or a reaction strategy (Berry 2005) as a way of coping with precarity. The former strategy is characterised by adapting to the conditions available, whereas the latter is built on striving for equal treatment and recognition. Dealing with precarious working conditions by using adequate resources and capital depends not only on a single factor but on the interaction of several factors, where there is a certain degree of unpredictability in terms of the migrant's working conditions. In this case, it is difficult to generalise about work, gender, ethnicity or other social factors. Some of the most dominant stories of cleaning workers suggest that they felt more stressed and worn down than construction workers. However, the latter stated that their long working hours are also physically hard in the long term. Both cleaners and construction workers experience employment insecurity or the fear of being fired, which due to the pressure or fear also induces an increased pace of work. Furthermore, cleaners, in particular, mentioned that their jobs are in danger if they improve their cultural capital by gaining more knowledge, becoming members of trade unions (obtaining representational security), learning the Danish language and taking on further education. The greater accessibility of these ways of acquiring social and cultural capital for migrant cleaners, when compared with the narratives of the construction workers, makes it clear that this factor has a substantial impact on the many dismissals of CEE workers in the cleaning industry. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that migrant workers in the cleaning sector are more prone to precarious working conditions than those in construction. This difference could be linked to gender in the two sectors and to the type of work performed in cleaning.

Concluding discussion

Based on the interviewees' experiences of employment relations in the cleaning and construction industries in Denmark, a clear pattern emerges of the migrants' dependency on others in order to maintain their employment and income. This dependency creates an unequal balance of power between the CEE migrant workers and the employer in either industry. The power relations are expressed through how much influence a worker has on wages, working conditions, occupational and representational security and opportunities for advancement. The occurrence of these conditions in work also corresponds to work precarity as conceptualised by Standing (2011). Precarity can be observed in the narratives of migrants but is mostly related to hierarchy in the workplace and particularly in processes of negotiation (Watson 2003) between employers and migrant workers. However, if the negotiations implied that the migrant workers had gained increased cultural and social capital – more knowledge about the Danish labour market system, Danish language skills and union representation – the workers were seen as posing a threat to the 'work relationship hierarchy'. Cleaners, notably, reported experiencing situations where they were fired soon after their employer became aware that they had signed up for membership in a trade union. Participants in the study have generally indicated that the relationship between the employer and migrant is more 'balanced' if their employer has an ethnic-Danish background, compared to relationships with co-ethnic employers. However, this aspect is also outlined regarding the problematic 'power struggle' between the migrant workers themselves, where some workers accuse others of 'sucking up to the boss' or 'engaging in slave-like behaviour'. In this case, a stronger ethnic hierarchy arises in the workplace and causes power struggles, if the workers are keen to improve their position and create a greater guarantee of employment and job security by applying a reaction strategy to cope with precarious working conditions. This study has shown that CEE migrants sought to 'balance out' any unequal relationships by drawing on their

resources and looking for other jobs that offered higher wages, better working conditions, occupational security, representational security and generally more opportunities.

Social capital plays a crucial role in accumulating those resources and other forms of capital (economic and cultural) which the individual can obtain in a given context. Regarding the importance of social networks and how reliable they are, it makes a difference whether a network is limited to the migrant's own ethnic group and/or also includes a network of different ethnic groups (Agnitsch, Flora and Ryan 2006; Putnam 2000), in particular Danes, in this case. The narratives of the labour migrants also reproduced the fact that the relationship with the employer and the working culture of the country can give rise to experiences of inclusion in a society through cleaning and construction work. Here, social relations play a crucial role in the migrants' overall well-being and sense of employment security. Research suggests that social interaction between migrants and national workers is limited by segregation within, and lack of daily interaction outside, the workplace, as well as migrants' social characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, social position and length of stay (Gsir 2014). One important factor seems to be the degree of migrants' isolation or integration in the workplace and how precarious work conditions can enhance the effects of isolation and *vice versa*.

Precarious working conditions amplify power struggles for better wages, especially if there is an opportunity to earn a better wage than in the migrants' countries of origin. Denmark has markedly higher salaries compared to the wage levels in CEE countries (OECD 2017). The higher wage level is regarded as a gain at the beginning of the migrants' experience but, over time, as the acquisition of knowledge about Danish conditions and labour laws, increases the migrants' struggle for higher wages and symbolic capital or recognition (Bourdieu 1986a). Furthermore, research shows that CEE migrants increasingly experience discrimination, negative stereotyping and disqualification of their skills in the labour markets of other European countries (Alberti *et al.* 2013; Anderson *et al.* 2006; Ciupijus 2011). These factors are crucial to the experience of precarious work and the individual migrant's coping strategies. The narratives in this study contribute new knowledge on labour migrants' working lives and how they cope with precarity. They also show that there is a need to strengthen efforts to improve migrants' working conditions and ensure their social mobility and equality by strengthening their coping strategies and possibilities to make use of their social and cultural capital which, in this study, has been shown to prevent some aspects of work precarity. Research needs to pay more attention to already 'established' coping mechanisms of migrant employees in order to gain a nuanced insight into what precarity is and how it varies according to the sector or type of industry. Generally, the patterns in the migrants' narratives indicated that the cleaners are more exposed to social conflicts, exploitation and lay-offs in their working environment than the construction workers. On the basis of these experiences, both cleaners and construction workers were able to prevent different work precarities having a substantial effect on their overall well-being, over a more-extended period.

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